

THE CHARM

Tin busted open the rusted door. She rubbed her shoulder and glanced around the room as her eyes adjusted. A crack in the roof revealed a sickly glow of sunlight.

‘It’s clear. Come on.’ Tin beckoned to the boy at her side.

A musty smell invaded her nostrils. Bruise-blue lichen spread its veins across the blackboard at the far end. She sneezed and picked a cobweb out of her spiky dark hair. Pinewood school desks had toppled over and collapsed. The greying dust made them look like gravestones in the shadows. Not that Tin had ever seen a graveyard except in books. The concrete walls seemed stable enough – she didn’t want to end up buried alive in an old-world building like Rem. Tin shuddered. The kid was still hovering behind her.

‘Someone’s already cleansed this place,’ Mouse said. ‘Maybe we should go?’

‘Nah. Don’t be a dumb kid. It just looks that way.’

‘I’m not a kid.’ Mouse put his hands on his hips.

‘Yes you are. You’re barely out of single digits. And I’m twice you’re age so don’t answer back. Unless you want me to tell the Inquisitors they matched us wrong and someone else should train you up? They don’t like being told they made a mistake...’

He shook his head. ‘N-no.’

‘Or maybe I can tell them you don’t like working? You do realise not having a job is illegal in this city, even for twelve years old?’

Mouse fiddled with his moth-eaten tshirt.

‘Umm, yes. I promise won’t answer back again.’

‘Good. Watch and learn, Mouse – there’s a pro at work. I’ll find a stash. Hold this.’

She passed over her battered leather jacket. A beat of sweat trickled down Tin’s face.

How come it was always so damn hot even though the sun spent most of its time hidden

behind that wretched ash cloud? But she'd picked a good time to hunt. An endless night would come when the fall-out was really thick. Made your eyes sting. Today was ok.

'I thought schools and libraries were the first places the Inquisition cleansed?'

Tin tapped on the mouldy floorboards with her knife and pulled up loose ones to check underneath.

'So did I. Guess this place either had a sympathetic Collector assigned, or a useless one. Maybe a Preserver even came along...'

She stood on the least rotten-looking chair and started poking the ceiling tiles out. Nothing up there either. Damn. Then something caught her eye. The blackboard was sticking a bit too far out from the wall. Teachers didn't need a six-inch thick blackboard to write on... even someone like her who'd never been to school could figure that out. Tin jumped off the chair.

'Get back.'

She hooked her fingers around the bottom corner and tugged. The board fell to the ground with a thud and sent a cloud of dust up with it. Sure enough, there was a stash of books crammed in the cavity behind. Classic tactic.

'Told you I was a pro.'

She swept them all onto the floor in a pile of fluttering pages and bent spines. The boy dived for them but she held him back by the scruff of his collar.

'Wait. You know the Inquisitors' rules right? I'm supposed to read the training manual introduction to newbies before we start sifting.'

Mouse looked from her to the books again, straining against her grip.

'Fine.' Tin rolled her eyes. 'I'll skip bits and summarise it, but don't go telling the Inquisition ok? Or I'll kill you.'

'I promise I won't.'

‘Good. I’m doing this for reasons of efficiency.’ She cleared her throat of the dust.

‘What happened in the aftermath half a century ago was so unspeakable – and believe me, at your age you don’t even know that half of it – that the Inquisitors can *never* allow technology like that to exist again. All traces of past-tech must be cleansed from the earth forever. From a single spark can rise a bomb. Then another cataclysm. Film negatives were pretty much all erased in the blast. Everything on the internet was wiped. But books... well for some reason they’re harder to make go away. That’s your lesson over for today. Get sifting.’

Mouse dived into the pile of tomes and started reading bits out at random. She tried to ignore him. Like nails on a damn blackboard...

‘On 21 February 1804, the world's first steam-powered railway journey took place when Trevithick's—’

‘Stop right there kid. A history text book, right? That’s definitely going in the bag. Some serious cleansing needed there.’

The kid’s backpack was practically the same size as he was. But now was as good a time as any for him to get stronger. With luck it wouldn’t be heavy enough to stop Mouse from running if they came across trouble back out on the open streets.

‘We’re doing MACH 12 already, but it still feels like we’re standing still. How does that even work?’

Tin was flipping through pages so fast she got a papercut. Shit, better not get that infected. Not smart in a world without antibiotics. She sucked the end of her finger.

‘What’s MACH12?’ Mouse shuffled to sit next to her.

‘It’s something to do with a vehicle’s speed. An aeroplane I think. Sounds like a novel not a text book, but better put it in the bag just in case.’

Before long she'd have enough credits from the Inquisitors to move to the countryside and out of this shitty city. Maybe she'd even get away before the radiation damage became irreversible.

'How about this? *A merry little surge of electricity piped by automatic alarm from the mood organ beside his book awakened Rick Deckard.*'

'That's a good example to pick out kid. See, that's tech, but it's from a work of fiction, not past-tech. They only want to cleanse stuff that was real. If it could be built once, it could be built again – then it's a problem.'

'Ok. Thanks Tin.'

'Chuck it in the bag.'

A sudden clang of metal from outside made Tin jolt.

'Quiet. You hear that?'

'No. Hear what?'

'Shut up, I said quiet.'

Silence now. Just the wind. She was always jumpy on a job, even though the Collectors had it easier now. Couple of decades after the cataclysm they had to do all of this with crazed gangs swarming around. Just the odd crazy these days if you were unlucky. The pair of them went back to quietly pouring over the pile of books, and throwing the odd one into the rucksack. She stopped minding that he read every other damn sentence out. The kid was alright really. It was just a long time since she'd been given someone to train. Longer still since she had a partner assigned. Since Rem... this whole job was much easier alone.

'I'm hungry,' Mouse said when they'd nearly finished sorting through the books.

'Already? We ate last night.'

The kid nodded.

‘Fine. But rations are tight.’ She opened a leather pouch. ‘One biscuit now, ok. Then one when we’re done.’

He took the biscuit gratefully, even though it looked like compacted sawdust and tasted as bad.

‘Why do you call yourself Tin?’

She chewed over her mouthful.

‘Because it’s my name.’

‘Tin ain’t a name. Tell me why or I’ll just keep asking,’

She took a swig from her flask of de-sal water then offered him some.

‘You’re a pain, you know that? And persistent. Like those mosquitos that swarm around the river of shit downtown.’

‘But why that name?’

‘Alright. Fine. It’s Tin, as in the Tin Man from The Wizard of Oz. Ever find a copy of that book?’

The boy shook his head.

‘Course not. Well, it’s the character with no heart. Guess you can’t do this job if you feel too much.’

‘Does The Wizard of Oz need cleansing if I find it?’

‘Nah, because it’s got no basis in reality. And by the way, why do they call you Mouse?’

‘Obvious isn’t it?’

‘You’re answering back...’

‘Sorry. It’s because I get myself into places not many other people can.’

Tin eyed him up and down. Made sense. The kid was barely four feet tall and scrawny at that, even though ration portions were getting little better these days.

Suddenly the door swung open. Tin gasped as a bright beam dazzled her eyes, then jumped to her feet. A silver-haired woman in a white suit walked in. She was holding a torch.

‘What the... you ain’t allowed that past-tech, lady.’ Tin reached for her knife and fingers brushed empty air.

‘Ready for your test now?’ The older woman shone the light at them.

‘Who are you?’ Tin folded her arms. ‘Nobody said nothing about a test today.’

‘Marks out of ten?’ The lady said.

‘Well, I guess four, but the kid’s new. Cut him some slack.’

‘Eight out of 10,’ Mouse said.

The older lady’s voice was quiet and still as air. You could cut glass with that fine accent. ‘Are you certain? You know what that means.’

Tin fixed a stare on a boy. ‘Want to tell me what the fuck’s going on?’

He ignored her and nodded at the silver-haired woman. ‘I’m certain.’

‘Wait, eight’s good right? That’s ok then.’ Tin brushed the back of her hand over her clammy brow.

‘It’s better than good.’ The other woman’s lips curled. ‘You’re excellent at investigating buildings. Not so good at investigating people though.’

‘What the hell do you mean?’ Tin said.

‘You really can’t tell? Mouse here’s got a special way of getting into places no one else can. He’s a Preserver mole.’

‘You little—’

Tin stepped towards them both, hands outstretched. She’d strangle that bastard first. But the lady pulled a gun out. More banned tech. A Glock 18. Seen it in a book. 33 rounds in 3 seconds. She didn’t have chance. Tin raised her hands and clenched her jaw. Mouse was carefully gathering all the books up and clutched the backpack tightly.

‘Let’s talk.’ Tin shifted on her feet, legs shaking.

‘There’s nothing to talk about,’ said the silver-haired woman. ‘We Preservers can’t have too many skilled Collectors going around. Of course, we can’t get rid of you all. Too suspicious. The Inquisition would be onto us immediately. So we only cleanse the good ones. Fortunately most of you are sub-par to say the least.’

‘What are you going to do with me?’

Shit. She’d left her knife by the blackboard. The kid knew it. He wasn’t so dumb after all. She scanned for another weapon within arm’s reach. Some table tops and chair legs. Fuck all use against a gun. Her way out was blocked.

‘It’s up to you what we do.’ The lady circled Tin like the desert dogs did with people who got lost on the city dunes. ‘Perhaps you could be trusted to join us. Or we’ll pick an accident for you. Maybe it’s his turn to come up with one?’

Mouse was staring at with a blank expression. Smart *and* evil. He’d go far. Little shit.

‘Rem... the building collapse. Did you—’

‘I don’t recall them all.’ She shrugged, silver hair bobbing off her shoulders. ‘Or maybe you could pick the accident yourself, Tin?’

Ballng her fists, Tin wiped the droplets off her cheeks. Damn hot weather making her sweat. She’d felt proud when Rem gave her the name all those years ago. Carried it before her like a shield. A protective charm. Tin as in the Tin Man because she was heartless. Or was it because like the Tin Man she thought she didn’t have a heart, but found it? Or something else entirely. Her pulse was racing fast and her vision was starting to blur. She couldn’t remember which it was anymore.

Tin dived for the gun. *33 rounds in 3 seconds...*